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BLESS No 33 Artistcare

BLESS No 28
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BLESS Nº 59

BLESS swimming

Nº61

Holding on together

the Explosion

BLESS (B)

BLESS is the creative polymath lead by partners Desiree Heiss and Ines Kaag. Since 1995, BLESS has succeeded in consistently being inconsistent, seamlessly moving between areas of fashion, home goods, product design, performance, installation, and contemporary art — often thriving in the blurry boundaries of each. The resulting objects are otherworldly, completely familiar yet totally alien, best understood as fully "BLESS." What is surprising is that the motives that shape this utterly unique practice remain quite practical. As Heiss and Kaag explain, their work is strongly tied to ideas of structure, sustainability, reuse, and recontextualization. The Multicollection T-Shirt is a paradigm of this thinking: an official bootleg of an unofficial bootleg, which begins to answer (or ask) what does it mean to bootleg yourself? Interview by Ben Schwartz (BS).

> BS: How do you understand bootlegging today? Do you see a relationship between the idea of bootlegging and your work?

B: Over the past years, our understanding of the word "bootlegging" has changed a lot. Instead of seeing it

as a lesser version or reproduction of an object or concept (a copy to be sold at a cheaper price), we have come to view it as a method of research and a means of getting to know an original.

In terms of the reproduction of our own design and ideas, we feel quite inviolable. As a small brand, we consider it an honor if the products we create trigger the desire in others to possess, copy, or reproduce them, as you wouldn't do this with something meaningless. On the contrary, it hurts much more when people who were part of our structure apply laboriously researched contacts and long term relationships to their own or other brands. In such an event, we try to be as easy and Buddhistic as possible. We call our profession "situation design," a sportive and spiritual import/export business.

If bootlegging also means the elegant infiltration of existing systems (consumerism and our society in general) then we would like to reserve a seat in the front row of underground activists. We are constantly working on the sustainability of our structure.

BS: Could you elaborate on how you consider sustainability in your practice?

B: Since 2012, with the creation of BLESS N°46 Contemporary Remediation, we stopped purchasing fabrics at a large scale and began to rely on the leftovers of big fashion houses, such as Hermès and Fendi. This strategy allows us to work with amazing quality, but considerably reduces the number of pieces we can create. Production-wise, it's absolutely inefficient, but it allows us to work with materials we otherwise could not afford. Further, we constantly use and re-use our own design leftovers which is our

way to clean our path up and take responsibility for all items that didn't find a satisfied owner. We re-transform them and propose them as unique pieces every season. Examples of such products are:

BLESS N°49 Insert Editions: We cut existing BLESS tops and jackets at the shoulder line and insert a piece of fabric from the current collection to link the pieces. It can then be worn with the additional part around the neck, which makes it look like the piece has an incorporated scarf, or you can let it fall down and it gives a more extended and dramatic silhouette.

BLESS N°67 Overstockjeans: A full pair of BLESS trousers is cut at the back and inserted as a front piece, attached to a jeans backside.

The way we think about sustainability and re-use in design carries over into our business structures. Often people think that designers should always be thinking about the next color of the season, or what crazy shape a product could develop. In reality, we need 98% of our creativity for developing alternative business models, interim solutions to survive with our little structure, and paying our team and rents punctually at the end of the month. Over the years we have developed a stable mix of collaborations, teaching and learning, barter deals, and crossed uses of budgets — the mix of strategies has become a growing experience. Our path allows us to discover how to use and combine interests and inspires us to sometimes interlink different projects: from those that are commercially necessary to those that are more of a hobby.

BS: I recently learned the backstory of the Multicollection t-shirt. Could you talk a little more about this piece?

B: Since the beginning, our practice has been mostly interested in re-use and re-assembly: taking existing items and augmenting them, combining them in a different way, bringing them to life in new contexts, reworking the idea of personal style that is always a mix of things, to bring clothing in as lifelong companions.

But we also recently came to copy ourselves with a bootleg BLESS product. One day Wendy from Ooga Booga, a store in LA, sent us a picture showing a young visitor in her shop wearing a T-shirt with a printed BLESS title: BLESS N°28 Climate Confusion Assistance. Wendy asked us if this was a real BLESS product, as she had never seen this before. It in fact wasn't a product from us, but we found it brilliant that someone "sampled" one of our titles in order to communicate it in the form of a product. We honestly felt embarrassed that we didn't do it ourselves in a lifespan of 25 years, especially since "title designing" is one of the dearest hobbies of BLESS!

Even after years of re-consuming our own visual output, it never came to our mind to re-use our own titles. In the middle of this inspirational moment, it felt like a fan product had revealed itself. So the Multicollection T-shirts were born, and we loved the way they developed. We are now in the second season and the T-shirts are having a good spread already.

We are reminded of another example of bootlegging in our work...many years ago, we found a wooden carved Coca-Cola bottle in a market in Zan-

p. 268: BLESS N°67 Situation Designer, Overstockjeans (2019)

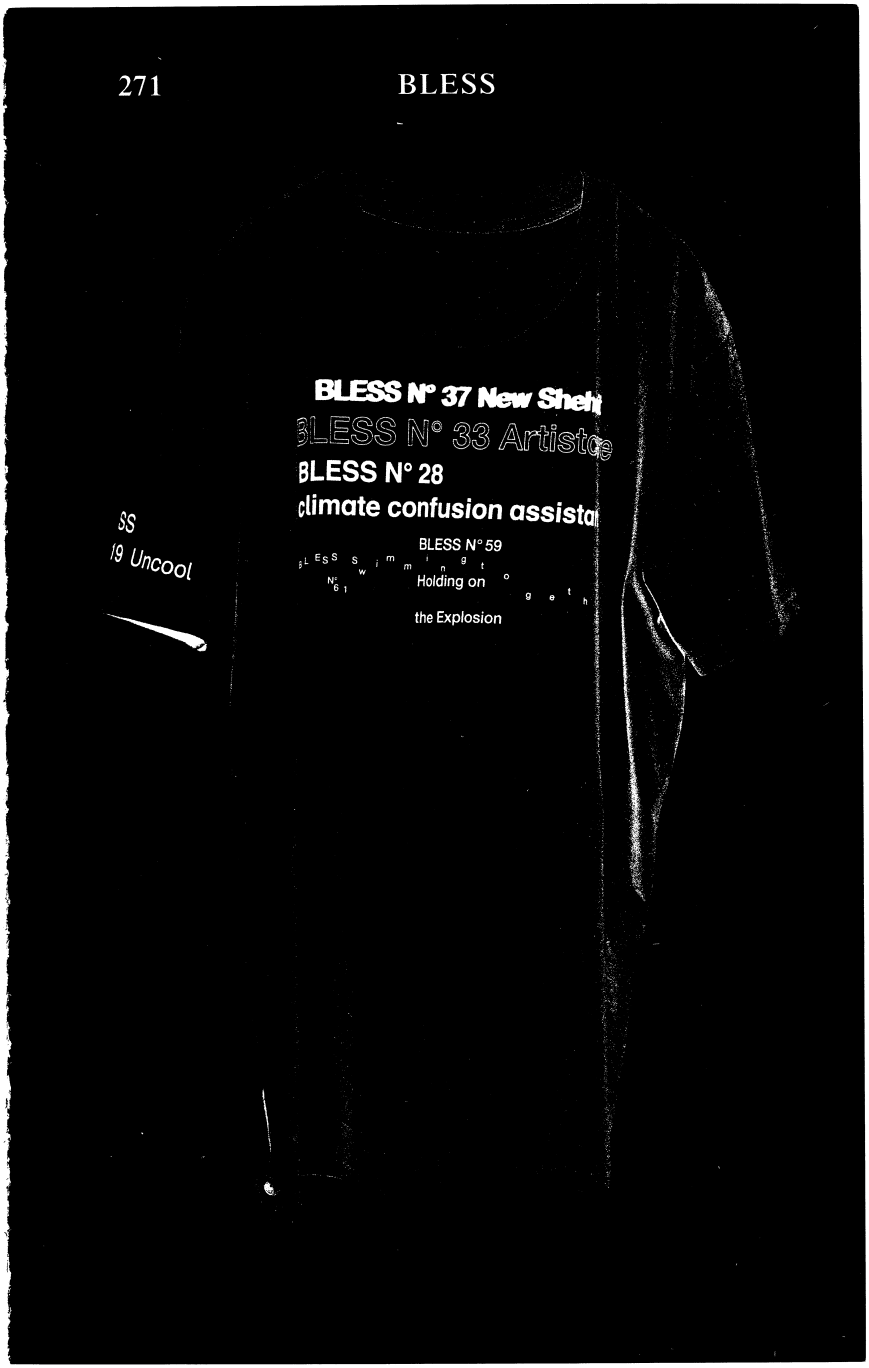
zibar. We started to sell the bottle in our BLESS N°08 Found Object collection. This series included found and inexpensive objects that we felt should be aligned to a higher-priced market, as we were in awe of their craftsmanship. Originally we were afraid of getting in trouble with Coca-Cola, but they adored the object and sponsored the catalog and the event. At the time, they understood that the act of carving their banal and cheap product into wood was actually an act of honor. Then, us selling this product through lifestyle boutiques again elevated their image.

> BS: The Coca-Cola bottle seems like an especially intriguing and complex example of bootlegging because of the world of difference between the artisan's reality and the corporate world of Coca Cola. Do you feel the artisan properly benefited from this project? I begin to wonder how bootlegging defies or reinforces disparate power structures and fiscal inequalities?

B: It's a brilliant question and interesting to explore further what happened after this discovery. We later got back in touch with the artisans and re-ordered some bottles as they became quite popular. This then triggered our wish to have other items carved in wood, and we commissioned these Tanzanian woodcarvers to copy classic wristbands and digital watches that we wanted to wear in the form of wooden bangles.

Furthermore, they also carved sleeve parts and jewelry we made out of wood. Apart from the fact

p. 271: BLESS N°67 Situation Designer, Multicollection T-Shirt (2019)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that we commissioned more work from the artisans, it made them aware of unique abilities and inspired them to carve objects other than the traditional statues they would normally sell on the market. We, by the way, also tried to commission traditional German woodcarvers in the Black Forest, and companies that specialized in wooden decorative works in France, but nobody could meet our expectations — the technical skills and knowledge to carve such intricate pieces had become a lost art.

BS: Bootleg fashion seem to be having a particular moment right now. Do you have any thoughts as to why brands have embraced this act and what the implications might be?

B: The bootleg factor is an indicator for objects of desire. No desire for the unreachable, no bootleg. The rarer and more desired the original, the more it gets bootlegged, quantity-wise.

Opposite to this, there are also conceptual and political acts that manifest through projects where partial content was extracted from its original context to create a new original, like a Vetements DHL T-shirt. The almost identical copy (use of the same cheap materials) could on one hand manifest as a message of complicity with low-paid workers. The piece could also be read as irony, spitting on workwear that is now a leisure gown for the rich, a way of devaluing the uniform and the labor behind it.

In this case, it seems as though a circle got closed. In a city like Berlin, it is truly impossible to

p. 272: BLESS N°08 Found Objects, Wooden Coca-Cola Bottle (2004)

distinguish between a well-rested homeless person and a Russian kid dressed in Balenciaga. Let's decide to like this and embrace the vision that the high-fashion-market is ready for occupational retraining.

The popularity of the bootleg as well speaks to the idea of authorship becoming more and more obsolete. Whatever you develop, people will have the right to appropriate and take further, as programmers do when they build based on open source. Everything interrelates and all original creation is influenced/has always been influenced by the pool of inspiration that is provided by its surroundings.

Thus, we as "creators" appreciate seeing the crucial point and goal shifting. Instead of "designers" we would describe what we do as situation design, meaning to be Impulsgeber und Auslöser (stimulator and trigger). The future will hopefully operate more with commonly shared values instead of celebrating single inventors that get pushed in the capitalistic world—concentrating on placing a successful product but forgetting about an all-round responsibility.

BS: Could you elaborate on this idea of "situation design?"

B: The whole process to find that term took us about 20 years. We realized more and more that the main act and special accomplishment of BLESS is not its products but its particularity of a self-defined, made-to-measure profession that is constantly evolving and adapting with the times. It is kind of category-free and could possibly act in whatever field of interest we define.

Since it is driven by personal need, without having to depend on any market, we are able to operate

on a more intuitive level. We create whenever we feel the need for something, be it a product or a situation, that we can't find elsewhere. Often it is a situation that we find ourselves in when clients, people, and institutions would invite us to participate or come up with a project. The "term" was born when we had to define our input in a collaboration with a performance artist. Perhaps we were originally intending to develop costumes and set design, but we found ourselves thinking about the why and what for, and the screenplay and the movements itself, and in the end, it became more a situation that was shared with an audience.

BS: What is the future of bootlegs?

B: We imagine bootlegging as a trigger of participatory design: not wanting to purchase a bootlegged product, but creating a copy yourself. In this way you "honor" the existing design; you put in your own effort to personalize it. The time investment and joy of applying personal creative skills might lead that creation to a higher price level than the original (industrial manufactured) version.

Title page (p. 264): Graphic from the BLESS N°67 Situation Designer, Multicollection T-Shirt (2019)